

Large print exhibition text



Scythians

Warriors of ancient Siberia

Please do not remove from the exhibition

This two-part guide provides all the exhibition text in large print.

There are further resources available for blind and partially sighted people:

Audio described tours for blind and partially sighted visitors, led by the exhibition curator and a trained audio describer will explore highlight objects from the exhibition. Tours are accompanied by a handling session (£). Booking is essential, please email access@britishmuseum.org

Saturday 7 October 16.00-18.15

Thursday 16 November 16.00-18.15

A book containing a self-led descriptive tour for partially sighted visitors is available in the exhibition. It contains descriptions of ten objects selected from the exhibition, each with a simplified black and white diagram. Key features in the diagrams are labelled. A tactile version of the images with labels in Braille is also available.

The objects that are included in the books are marked with this symbol on their label



There is also an object handling desk at the exhibition entrance that is open daily from 11.00 to 16.00.

An audio introduction to the exhibition can be found on the Access section of the exhibition webpage: britishmuseum.org/whats_on/exhibitions/scythians/access.aspx

For any queries about access at the British Museum please email access@britishmuseum.org

BP has been discovering energy around the world for more than a century, from the deserts of the Middle East to the depths of the North Sea. Today BP is delighted to help you discover more about the ancient Scythian people. Little known outside Russia or its modern neighbours, this remarkable nomadic culture dominated the vast Eurasian plains for hundreds of years, proving to be as intrepid as the Vikings and more enduring than the ancient Greeks or Assyrians.

We believe in bringing people closer to arts and culture. That's why, through our partnership with the British Museum, we've helped over four million people gain a deeper understanding of world cultures with BP exhibitions, displays and performances.

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Visitors are advised that this exhibition contains human remains. If you would like to know more please ask a member of staff.

Human remains in the British Museum

The study of human remains provides a unique insight into the lives of people from the past. The British Museum is committed to curating human remains with care, respect and dignity. Find out more about our principles governing the holding, display, care and study of human remains on the Museum website: britishmuseum.org/humanremains.

Families, saddle up!

Follow the horseman on our family labels to look, learn and explore what life was like for ancient Scythians (pronounced 'SIH-thee-uns') in Siberia.

Rediscovering the Scythians

The Scythians were a great nomadic people who flourished between 800 and 200 BC. Originating in southern Siberia, they eventually controlled a vast region from northern China to the Black Sea.

They had no written language, so we rely on archaeology and ancient accounts to reconstruct the nomads' lives. The only structures they left were graves marked by burial mounds. Their contents, some exceptionally preserved by frozen conditions, reveal the Scythians to have been skilled riders, sophisticated craftspeople and fearsome warriors.

Map caption: The extent of Scythian territory in the ancient world, with modern reference points.

Gold belt plaque

Nomads in Siberia made this prized gold plaque about 2,300 years ago. One half of a symmetrical belt buckle, it would undoubtedly have belonged to Scythian nobility. Gold was associated with the sun and power.

The scene shows a dead man, a female deity with a high ponytail (left), a tree of life in which a quiver of arrows hangs, and a man holding the reins of two horses. It may be concerned with death and the renewal of all living things. The scene is not only lifelike, it is also symbolic, reflecting key elements of Scythian life.

4th–3rd century BC

Siberia; Siberian Collection of Peter the Great

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg



Family label:

Buckle bling

This gold buckle was made by nomadic people in Siberia over 2,300 years ago. Nomads move around and do not live in one place for very long. The Scythians lived in tents, and herded sheep and horses.

The buckle tells us about their life – what can you see? The wall image will help.

A nomadic lifestyle

The environment dramatically shaped the way the Scythians lived: thin soil and extremes in weather made the Eurasian steppe unsuitable for agriculture, but it was ideal for grazing. The Scythians lived off herds of livestock and moved when resources ran low or harsh weather pushed them on.

The belt plaque and its imagery reflect key elements of Scythian life.

Image captions:

Weaponry

The Scythians were masters of horseback archery. Here, a bow case with its arrows hangs in the tree.

Beliefs

Without written records, we rely on the analysis of Scythian art to try to understand their beliefs. We know the figure on the left is female because she wears a tall wig headdress (there is an example in the exhibition). Scholars think she is a deity and may be connected with renewal and the afterlife.

Death and burial

The Scythians buried their dead with all they needed for the afterlife. In the high Altai Mountains where it was colder, graves could only be dug when the ground was not frozen, so bodies were mummified to preserve them until they could be buried.

Environment

The Scythians made effective use of natural resources, and their sophisticated nomadic lifestyle was developed to exploit.

Horsemanship

Horse breeding was key to Scythian life. Horses provided transport, milk and meat, and were crucial to the nomads' military strength. They were highly prized, and were often buried with their owners.

Craftworking

They were skilled at working metals and made sophisticated gold objects, which indicated the high status of the person who wore or owned them.

Image caption: Southern Ural Mountains. It was here and in Siberia that gold objects began to be discovered from the end of the 17th century.

© Photo: Anton Romanov/Shutterstock.com

For centuries all traces of the Scythians were lost. Discoveries of ancient tombs in the early 18th century revealed a wealth of treasures and sparked the rediscovery of their rich culture.

First discoveries

In the 1720s, Tsar Peter I, 'the Great' (1672–1725), sent scientific expeditions from Russia's new capital St Petersburg deep into southern Siberia in search of natural resources and trade routes. The mission unearthed fantastic gold ornaments in ancient burial mounds. News of their discoveries soon reached Peter, who decreed that any such items must be sent to St Petersburg and that drawings be made 'of everything that is found'. He commissioned scholars to 'search out all manner of rarities' and large numbers of burials were explored.

After his death, the gold objects were housed in Peter's **Kunstkamera** ('cabinet of curiosities'),

the first museum in Russia. In 1851 they were transferred to the Hermitage Museum and remain invaluable to the study of ancient Scythian nomads.

Image caption: Rows of burial mounds in the Altai region of southern Siberia.

© Ghent University, Department of Archaeology, 2007

Image caption:

A gold coiled panther plaque was among the objects unearthed in ancient Scythian burial mounds.

© The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, 2017. Photo: V Terebenin

View of the Summer Palace of Peter I

Aleksei Fedorovich Zubov (1682/83–1751)

A series of etchings formed a **Panorama of St Petersburg**, of which this is one. The foreground shows the Neva embankment, with the Summer Palace of Peter the Great on the left. In the centre is the Summer Garden: a symmetrical 'French' garden with ornamental flowerbeds, pavilions and fountains. The text at the top reads: 'Summer Palace'. The palace was built between 1710–1712 by the architect Domenico Trezzini (1670–1734).

1716–17

Engraving workshop of the St Petersburg Printing House
Paper; etching, burin engraving
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

View of the Second Winter Palace

Aleksei Fedorovich Zubov (1682/83–1751)

While allocating plots of land along the river Neva for various construction projects, Peter the Great personally chose the plot, now occupied by the Hermitage Theatre, for a small two-storey wooden 'winter house'. In 1711–12 the governor of St Petersburg, Aleksandr Menshikov, ordered the construction on this spot of the stone palace shown here. It was originally named 'The Bridal House', as it was completed to coincide with the wedding of Peter and Catherine in 1712.

Top, over the ribbon: 'Winter Palace'
1716–17

Engraving workshop of the St Petersburg Printing House
Paper; etching, burin engraving

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Peter the Great, Tsar of Russia (1672–1725)

Sir Godfrey Kneller (1646–1723)

Peter the Great's portrait was painted in 1698 when he was in London visiting King William III on a two-year diplomatic tour of Western Europe. Peter was particularly interested in Dutch and English ship-building, having begun the construction of a Russian navy in 1695. The Tsar is wearing armour and a richly embroidered ermine-lined cloak, with his crown and sceptre behind him. Ships, seen through the window, may allude to a mock sea-battle enacted for him at Portsmouth.

Signed and dated: 1698

Oil on canvas

Lent by Her Majesty the Queen

Family label:

A powerful portrait

Peter the Great ruled Russia 300 years ago. He sent people to explore Siberia in search of Scythian gold, and ordered that everything they found was sent to him for his new museum.

Imagine you are Peter, which Scythian object displayed here is your favourite?

Quote on wall:

The ancient gold and silver things, which are found in the earth of ancient tombs, people of any office are to declare ... and those things to be taken from them for the Treasury of the Great Tsar ...

Edict of Peter the Great (1672–1725)

The east façade of the Imperial Library and Kunstkamera

Grigory Anikeyevich Kachalov (1711/12–1759)

The four columns of text are written in Russian, German, French and Latin. Each reads 'Façade of the building housing the Imperial Library and **Kunstkamera** to the East'. **The Kunstkamera** ('cabinet of curiosities') commissioned by Peter the Great was the very first Russian museum.

Construction began in 1718. Progress was slow, and by the time of Peter's death in 1725 only the walls were completed. In 1724 a new architect took charge. His design saw the façade fitted with an ornate pediment composed of academically themed sculpture. The building was completed in 1734 when the tower was 'crowned' with the armillary sphere.

The Russian artist has signed the work in the bottom right. He went on to become director of the Engraving Chamber of the Academy of Sciences in 1757.

1741

Engraving Chamber of the Academy of Sciences,
St Petersburg

Paper; etching with burin and acid

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

**For the book lovers there is a library,
which would rival the best in its variety
and abundance of volumes.**

Greek physician, M.S. Wanderbech, on the library
of the **Kunstkamera**

Kunstkamera: cross section

Philipp Georg Mattarnovi (1714–1742)

This engraving shows the **Kunstkamera** central tower with museum galleries to the left and Library to the right. In 1726 the still unfinished building received the first collections, to be housed in the east wing. Natural history specimens including an elephant are visible on the third floor. The round hall on the ground floor was intended for the Anatomy Theatre, the third floor housed ‘the Famous Gottorp Globe’ – one of the first planetariums in the world – and the tower was equipped to house the observatory. The Library was founded by Peter the Great and by 1725 it contained some 11,000 volumes.

The text in Russian, German, French and Latin reads, ‘Side view of the Library and the **Kunstkamera** to the east’.

1737

Engraving Chamber of the Academy of Sciences,
St Petersburg

Paper; etched with burin and acid

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Kunstkamera: cross-section of the Gallery and First Hall

Christian Carl Albert Wortmann (1680/92–1760)

The image depicts part of the **Kunstkamera** with open cabinets full of objects placed between the windows. The text reads 'Side view of the gallery and the first hall with curiosities and second with rooms to the east'. Specimens include an elephant and a zebra. Eager to enrich the collection, Peter decreed:

If a man should find in the earth or water such ancient things as: stones of great rarity; bones of man, beast, fish or fowl, different to those we have now, or if the same, such as are greater or smaller in size than we are accustomed to ... or any other item that is old and rare – to be brought in, and exchanged for a generous payment.

1741

Engraving Chamber of the Academy of Sciences,
St Petersburg

Paper; etching by burin and acid

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

**Panorama of the Neva embankment from
the Summer Garden to St Isaac's Church**
Elliger Ottmar III (1703–1735)

The three pages are from a 1741 publication which includes 12 etchings depicting the façades, plans, sections and interiors of the building of the Academy of Sciences and its **Kunstkamera** ('cabinet of curiosities') in St Petersburg. In the foreground we see the river busy with ships. Behind are the Neva embankment, and the buildings of the new Academy on Admiralty Island.

From a drawing by C. Marselius, 1725
Engraving Chamber of the Academy of Sciences,
St Petersburg, 1728–29
Paper; etched with burin and acid
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

‘View of the Admiralty from the river’

The page shows the Admiralty (founded in 1704) and the Church of St Isaac of Dalmatia.

1. Church of St Isaac of Dalmatia
2. Admiralty smithy
3. Carpenter's hut
4. Admiralty steeple
5. Shops

‘List of the chambers of the Grand Admiral with the following’

The page shows the Winter Palace of Peter the Great and houses of admirals, generals and princes.

1. Chambers of General Admiral Prince Apraksin
2. Privy Councillor Sava Vladislavovich's
3. General Yagushinsky's
4. General Lieutenant Chernyshev's
5. Admiral Kreis's
6. Chief Chamberlain Alsuf'ev's
7. Winter House of His Imperial Majesty
8. Part of the Court Council

‘View of the City Council with the following chambers’

The page shows the Winter Palace of Peter the Great and houses of admirals, generals and princes.

1. Court Council
2. Chambers of Privy Councillor Musin-Pushkin
3. His Illustrious Highness Prince Kantemir’s
4. The entrance of His Imperial Majesty

Information banners on wall behind you:

Animal-style art

A common characteristic of all Scythian tribes was their unique decorative art. This is known as ‘animal-style art’ because it combines real animals with imagined beasts in distinctive contorted positions. Fantastic animal imagery appears everywhere – on jewellery, weapons, clothing, saddlery and even tattoos – and carried a deep significance for Scythian people.

This style focused on three elements: birds of prey, plant-eating animals with hooves and antlers, and feline predators. Without written sources, little can be known with certainty about Scythian beliefs. Through analysis of their art, many scholars think that they believed in a world divided into three: a heavenly plane containing birds, the central plane of the mortal world, and an underworld of supernatural beasts.

Image caption: Gold plaque showing a vulture mauling a yak.

Image caption: Gold plaque showing a winged griffin attacking a horse.

Image caption: Gold plaque showing a fight between a mythical beast and a tiger.

How were the plaques made?

The Scythians loved gold. Peter the Great's famous collection included many spectacular gold plaques from Siberia. Some were made by hand and hammered into a carved wooden form, with decoration added using small hammers and tools to groove and punch. Others were cast in a process that has left a cloth imprint on the back. Scientists are investigating how these were made.

One possibility is that a model of the plaque design was pressed into clay. Cloth was placed over the dry impression, and wet clay added to make the back, which took on the cloth's imprint. The textile was removed and the clay halves sealed to form a mould. Another view is that wax was pressed into a carved form of the design and reinforced on the back with cloth. It was encased in clay and baked. The wax melted and the textile burned, leaving a mould into which the metalsmith poured molten gold.

Image caption: Gold plaque made by hammering gold sheet over a carved wooden form.

Image caption: Cast gold object with a hollow back.

Image caption: Cast gold plaque with a cloth impression on the back.

Image caption: Cast gold plaque made using a clay mould.

Images © The State Hermitage Museum,
St Petersburg, 2017. Photo: V Terebenin

Tall showcase, behind you on left:

Torc with lion-head terminals

This neck ornament has a locking mechanism and clasp to enable it to be fastened securely around the neck. The surface decoration on the hollow gold tubes imitates twisted gold thread. The finely modelled lion head terminals are Greek in style: it may have been made in a Greco-Bactrian workshop located somewhere in the territories of northern Afghanistan or southern Uzbekistan. Greeks established themselves here after the conquest of Alexander the Great (356–323 BC).

4th–3rd century BC

Siberia; Siberian Collection of Peter the Great

Gold; chased and soldered

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Watercolour drawings

These drawings are from the illustrated inventory of Peter the Great's Siberian Collection. Peter amassed 250 Scythian gold artefacts, including those displayed nearby. They came from 7th- to 3rd-century BC Scythian burial mounds. Dug up by bands of treasure-hunters, the gold objects started to be discovered in the Urals and Siberia from the end of the 17th century onwards.

The Tsar forbade unauthorized excavations of ancient burial mounds and made treasure-hunting punishable by death. All previously found gold objects had to be delivered to the capital. Scholars were licensed to excavate for valuable artefacts and commissioned to explore Siberia. After the Tsar's death in 1725, the collection was kept in the **Kunstkamera**, and later transferred to the Hermitage Museum.

1730s

Watercolour on paper

Showing: gold torc with lion-head terminals;
one of a pair of gold belt plaques depicting figures under a tree
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Image caption: This digital microscope image shows a textile impression on the back of the belt plaque depicted above. These impressions are found on many Scythian gold plaques and are the result of a casting technique using wax and cloth.

© Trustees of the British Museum

Watercolour drawing

This drawing is from the illustrated inventory of Peter the Great's Siberian Collection. Peter amassed 250 gold artefacts from Scythian burial mounds, including the bracelet displayed here. The gold objects started to be discovered in the Urals and Siberia from the end of the 17th century onwards. The Tsar forbade unauthorized excavations of ancient burial mounds and made treasure-hunting punishable by death. Scholars were licensed to excavate and commissioned to explore Siberia.

1730s

Watercolour on paper, showing gold spiral bracelet
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Spiral bracelet

Spiral bracelets were a typical personal ornament of elite Scythian nomads during the last centuries BC. The terminals on this bracelet end in a fight scene, showing a Siberian tiger with a deer's foreleg protruding from its mouth.

The stripes on the tiger's back are incised, with a line of small notches down its scruff and spine, while the eyes are triangular. The deer's broad antlers follow the line of its neck. Its forelegs are stretched out directly under its ear, and its eye has a triangular dotted pupil.

4th–3rd century BC

Siberia; Siberian Collection of Peter the Great

Gold

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Belt plaque with vulture mauling a yak and a tiger

A vulture bites into the yak's neck with its sharp beak. The tiger's head is turned left as it bites the bird's tail. Small holes in the turquoise inlays suggest beads may have been reused to make the inlays. The reverse has a cloth impression made during manufacture which resembles a technique used by Chinese craftspeople. Two horizontal loops soldered on the back allowed the plaque to be attached to a belt.

Opulent decoration on belts and highly ornate buckles with graphic motifs help convey the world view of early Scythian nomads. Peter the Great's exceptional collection contains 14 pairs of different plaques, mainly in animal-style.

4th–2nd century BC

Siberia; Siberian Collection of Peter the Great

Gold, turquoise; cast with cloth impression on the reverse

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Watercolour drawing

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1730s

Watercolour on paper, showing gold belt plaque
with a vulture mauling a yak and a tiger
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Belt plaques with a tiger fighting a camel

The animals are locked in battle beneath a tree. The camel is depicted realistically, while at the tip of the tiger's tail there is a small head of a bird of prey, a detail which reveals the mythical nature of the scene. The camel fits somewhere between predators and herbivores in animal-style art, undoubtedly due to the formidable fangs and bad temper of male camels. Scythians encountered camels on the edge of the desert north-east of the Caspian Sea.

These plaques stand out from the rest of their kind in the Siberian Collection because of their small size. They lack any belt fitting, which implies that they may have been made especially to be buried with the dead.

3rd–2nd century BC

Siberia; Siberian Collection of Peter the Great

Gold

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Hollow spiral torc

This spiral neck ornament is decorated on the ends with figures of feline predators, perhaps tigers. Their long tails end in vulture heads and are decorated with turquoise inlays. The rest of their elongated bodies have some inlay ornament, but most is lost. The torc has two parts which were connected by a small wooden pin. It has the same stylistic features as similarly dated objects from ancient Iran, including the Oxus Treasure, and the Issyk burial in present-day Kazakhstan.

4th–3rd century BC

Siberia; Siberian Collection of Peter the Great

Gold

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Image caption: The X-ray shows that the torc is hollow and made of gold sheets hammered into shape. The brighter area at the animal's tail-end shows where it was inserted into the torc as a separate piece. The bright vertical line in the animal's head is a pin fixing it to the tube.

© Trustees of the British Museum

Image caption: The X-ray shows that the torc is hollow and made of gold sheets hammered into shape. The brighter area at the animal's tail-end shows where it was inserted into the torc as a separate piece. The bright vertical line in the animal's head is a pin fixing it to the tube.

© Trustees of the British Museum

Image caption: These images show two inlay cells on the arms of the figure in the tree. One is intact but the other is empty, revealing tool marks made by the goldsmith who prepared the cell before inlaying it.

© Trustees of the British Museum

Image caption: This image, taken with a scanning electron microscope, shows that the face of the archer was polished and handworked by the goldsmith after casting to remove the grainy surface texture.

© Trustees of the British Museum

Belt plaque with horsemen hunting a wild boar

No ordinary hunting scene, this is likely to be a heroic story of a ritual hunt. Its surreal nature is heightened by the rearing horses on the left and right, and the unseated rider among the branches, while the archer bears down upon the boar.

This is one of a pair of symmetrical, but not identical, belt-buckle plaques. They were the largest in Peter the Great's collection and also stand out for their style. The composition and detail bear similarities to the art in the 6th to 2nd centuries BC of the easternmost Scythians who occupied northern China. Instead of the traditional turquoise inlay, this example is decorated with blue glass imitations.

3rd–2nd century BC

Siberia; Siberian Collection of Peter the Great

Gold, smalt, coral

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Watercolour drawing

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The Tsar forbade unauthorized excavations of ancient burial mounds and made treasure-hunting punishable by death. All previously found gold objects had to be delivered to the capital. Scholars were licensed to excavate for valuable artefacts and commissioned to explore Siberia. After the Tsar's death in 1725, the collection was kept in the **Kunstkamera**, and later transferred to the Hermitage Museum.

1730s

Watercolour on paper showing, on the left, a gold belt plaque with a scene of a monster attacking a horse
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Belt plaque with a predator attacking a horse

Here a winged beast with a feline body and goat's horns attacks a fallen horse. It is the left part of a pair of identical plaques from a belt buckle. The thighs of both horse and predator were originally highlighted with geometric inlays, possibly turquoise but now missing. The hook on the front is for fastening the belt. Similar designs were widespread during the 4th and 3rd centuries BC, including examples from burials in southern Siberia and Kazakhstan.

4th–3rd century BC

Siberia; Siberian Collection of Peter the Great

Gold

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Image caption: Hammer marks on the reverse of this plaque show that the goldsmith hammered it into shape from the back. The rows of lightly punched half spheres, not found on other Scythian plaques, are yet to be fully understood.

© Trustees of the British Museum

Family label:

Fantastic beasts

From jewellery to tattoos, Scythians used animals in their designs. This belt plaque shows a horse being bitten by a fantastic beast with wings and horns. It belonged to someone powerful, perhaps even Scythian royalty.

What animal would you create for your own spectacular buckle?

Bridle fitting with a leopard mauling an elk

This circular plaque depicts an animal contest scene. The elk's muzzle (left) has a beak-like appearance and its ear is pointing forwards in an unrealistic manner, suggesting that this creature is from a mythical world. A loop on the back was used to attach the plaque to a horse's bridle. The style of the scene shows influence of the Achaemenid empire of ancient Iran, but where it was made is unknown.

5th–3rd century BC

Siberia; Siberian Collection of Peter the Great

Gold

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Belt plaque with dragons and ‘Tree of Life’

This is one of a pair of plaques forming a belt clasp. The fantastic animals resemble Chinese dragons and hark back to the art in the 6th to 2nd centuries BC of the easternmost Scythians who occupied northern China. This kind of imagery survived in the art of the nomadic Sarmatians, who succeeded the Scythians in the 2nd century BC.

The tree of life, connected to creation and renewal, is a common motif. The blue inlays are opaque coloured glass to imitate turquoise.

2nd–1st century BC

Siberia; Siberian Collection of Peter the Great

Gold, carnelian, glass

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Belt plaque with a tiger and monster

This is one of a pair of identical decorative belt plaques. A Siberian tiger (right) is pitted against a fantastic beast with the body of a feline predator, head of a wolf, antlers with points ending in birds of prey, and a heavy-beaked bird's head for a nose. These details identify the beast as a predator from the underworld.

Scenes of animal contest are one of the most popular motifs of later animal-style art from the second half of the 6th century BC. The killing of a living creature – usually a hoofed animal – by a predator from the underworld is thought to have symbolised concern over preservation of the world order.

4th–3rd century BC

Siberia; Siberian Collection of Peter the Great

Gold; cast with cloth impression on the reverse

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Image caption: This digital microscope view of one of the monster's paws shows a grainy surface texture, which is characteristic of gold that has been cast rather than handworked.

The smoother areas are the result of wear.

© Trustees of the British Museum

Watercolour drawings

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1730s

Watercolour on paper

Showing: a coiled panther accessory and an ornate belt buckle; the right portion of a gold belt plaque with a contest scene

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Gold coiled panther plaque

This hefty plaque may have been used as a clothing accessory, but is more likely to have been part of an ornamental horse bridle. It has attachment loops on the back. Originally it had colourful inlays, possibly turquoise, which have since been lost.

The design of a feline predator coiled into a circle with inlays for the nostrils, ears, tip of the tail and paws, is typical of Scythian animal-style art. This motif was popular but its exact meaning remains a mystery. Its body may have been inspired by the leopards living in the Altai Mountains. Judging by its style, this object is one of the oldest in Peter the Great's Siberian Collection.

7th century BC

Siberia; Siberian Collection of Peter the Great

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg



Information banner behind you:

Trans-Siberian Railway

Exploring Siberia in search of untapped natural resources and trade routes offered Russia new opportunities. Expansion led to greater interest in the geography and history of the peoples populating the regions of the Russian state, including Siberia. Ever since the 1700s, archaeologists have been exploring this region and making regular discoveries.

In 1891 Tsar Nicholas II (1868–1918) inaugurated a project to connect both sides of Russia with a 9,500-kilometre-long railway line reaching the Pacific Ocean.

Popularly known as the Trans-Siberian Railway, its construction was marked by great hardship but proved a powerful symbol of Russian achievement. It opened up the immense Siberian landscape occupied by Scythian warriors over 2,500 years before.

Image caption: One view from the huge watercolour panorama (1894–1899) by Russian artist Pavel Yakovlevich Pyasetsky (1843–1921) that recorded and celebrated the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway.

© The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Image caption: Postcard dated 6 August 1914 showing the Trans-Siberian Railway as it passes along the shore of Lake Baikal.

© Trustees of the British Museum

Digital media caption: Views from a huge watercolour panorama (1894–1899) by Russian artist Pavel Yakovlevich Pyasetsky (1843–1921) that recorded and celebrated the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway.

© The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Duration: 5 minutes

This projection is silent

Scythian treasures, some amazingly preserved in the Siberian permafrost, reveal the lives of fearsome nomadic warriors who occupied the grassy steppe over 2,500 years ago.

World of the Scythians

Siberia is vast. It makes up almost ten per cent of the earth's landmass. Much of it is frozen plains or forest, but it was in the grassland of southern Siberia that the Scythian lifestyle emerged around 800 BC.

As the Scythians developed more efficient horse riding gear, they were able to move their herds to new pasture according to the seasons. They spread across the huge belt of grassland, or steppe, extending from northern China to the Black Sea.

The Scythians had a keen understanding of their environment, which was perfectly suited to their lifestyle of herding and hunting. 'Scythians' is a

collective name for a confederation of different tribes who spoke Iranian dialects and shared a similar lifestyle, dress, weaponry and horse gear.

Map caption: Modern map showing the main route of the Trans-Siberian Railway and some important Scythian sites. The Scythians occupied most of the steppe region from northern China to the Black Sea.

Image caption: Some tribes occupied the pastures of the Altai Mountains during spring and summer.

Photo © E. Miklashevich

Image caption: The forest steppe region provided year-round grazing.

Photo © Eurasien-Abteilung, DAI

Image caption: Other Scythian tribes occupied the semi-desert to the south.

Photo © St J. Simpson

Rock art of southern Siberia

This vast region covers many different landscapes ranging from the high Altai Mountains to open woodland. It was once the territory of herders and hunters who left a remarkable number of engraved and pecked images on rocks and cliffs. These show many different species of animals, including deer, goats, bulls, horses and wild boar, as well as human figures, hunting or combat scenes, and chariots.

The earliest examples date to the 2nd millennium BC and are pre-Scythian. They continued throughout the Scythian period until later times. Their locations, often near passes, fords and cemeteries, were carefully selected to mark boundaries, define sacred landscapes, and display the social prestige of local elites.

Rock art: male-warrior

This rock art depicts a warrior. Three diagonal lines at the top represent the head. The lower part shows a belt suspending a dagger, whetstone

(a stone for sharpening metal tools and weapons), bow, quiver and a long-handled chisel.

From 900 to 500 BC, different regions of Eurasia developed their own monumental art style in the form of decorated stone slabs. Found largely in southern Siberia and Mongolia, these are now called 'deer stones' as the surfaces often depict images of deer.

8th century BC

Arzhan village, Piy-Khem region, Tuva, southern Siberia

Stone

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Image captions:

- The back shows a feline predator, its tail is on the right.
- The lower part shows tools and weapons suspended from a belt.
- The left side (above right) has a circle with radiating lines representing the sun, and a crescent moon.

Rock art: horses and chariots

This slab is important as it shows a horse-drawn chariot with spoked wheels. Three spare horses are tethered behind the chariot carriage, which was probably made of wickerwork. Unfortunately the top of the slab, where the second wheel would have been shown, is missing.

Ancient rock carvings with chariots such as this are common in Asia and Europe and are usually dated to the late 2nd millennium BC.

This piece was reused in building a 7th-century BC royal tomb, but may have been carved centuries earlier. It shows that chariots, previously of military use, may have continued as ritual vehicles in a period dominated by mounted warriors.

Before 7th century BC

Arzhan-2, Tuva region, southern Siberia

Stone

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Rock art: elks and camels

This is one of 15 pieces of ancient rock art that were reused in the 7th-century BC elite Scythian tomb of Arzhan-2. The already broken slab shows elks and Bactrian (two-humped) camels. These are the largest herbivores in the region and both appear in animal-style art.

Camels were highly valued for their capacity to carry substantial loads. Their shaggy coats, a valuable resource, enable them to withstand severe cold. They can live up to 40 years and are a source of nutritious milk and meat.

Before 7th century BC

Arzhan-2, Tuva region, southern Siberia

Stone

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Family label:

Living landscape

Animals were very important to the Scythians for milk, meat, clothing and to move around. Can you find the elks and two-humped camels on this stone? They are the largest animals that Scythian nomads saw in the Siberian landscape.

What's the largest animal you've ever seen?

Image caption: Chagan Valley, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia.

© Photo: E. Miklashevich

What did Scythians look like?

Hours in the saddle and frequent nights in the open air required comfortable all-weather clothing. Most Scythians wore trousers tucked into felt stockings, a tunic, a sheepskin coat with a belt, and soft leather boots. Women wore skirts and trousers, sometimes together. Some Scythians

wore distinctive pointed hats, or caps with earflaps. Chiefs wore gold and valuable furs, such as cheetah and leopard, which were perhaps traded or given as gifts between tribes.

Excavated human remains show that eastern Scythians were clean-shaven with short hair. These well-preserved bodies also show the men and women were heavily tattooed, and the women wore tall wig-headdresses over their shaven heads. Contemporary representations in Persian and Greek art show the men as bearded.

Image caption: Reconstruction of a Scythian man from the Altai region. Based on finds from Verkh-Khaldjin-2.

Drawing: D.V. Pozdnjakov

Image caption: Reconstruction of a woman wearing a fur coat, based on finds from burial mound 2 at Pazyryk in the Altai region. Some of her clothing and jewellery are displayed nearby.

Drawing: D.V. Pozdnjakov

Image caption: Reconstruction of a Scythian child from the Altai region, based on finds from Ulandryk.

Drawing: D.V. Pozdnjakov

Head of a chief from Pazyryk

Frozen conditions in the Altai region have preserved this man's remains. His monumental burial and high quality grave goods suggest that he was a tribal chief. He was about 55–60 years old when he died and 176 cm (5 ft 9 in) tall. He died violently from three battle-axe blows to the head, after which he was scalped. His body was embalmed and buried when the ground thawed in summer. Ancient tomb robbers later decapitated his corpse.

Late 4th – early 3rd century BC

Burial mound 2, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia

Human remains

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Tattoos

These tattoos are from the body of the Pazyryk chief. He bore many tattoos showing fantastic beasts depicted in the Scythian animal-style. Soon after his body was extracted from the ice during excavation in 1947, it began to decompose. His body was dissected so his tattooed skin could be preserved.

Tattooing was widely practised among Scythian men and women and across all levels of society. Every frozen mummy excavated in the Altai region has tattoos of wild or fantastic animals.

Studying these remains is transforming our knowledge of the Scythians. This has involved the use of scientific imaging techniques where the designs are difficult to see in natural light: infra-red shows the designs more clearly. There appear to be gender preferences for particular designs – women's tattoos show predators tormenting animals found in forests, whereas on men's tattoos they attack creatures found in the steppe.

World of the Scythians

Late 4th – early 3rd century BC

Burial mound 2, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia

Human remains with tattoos on the left upper arm, side of the chest and back of a man

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Image caption: Elaborate designs covered the man's arms, shoulders and the lower legs, but not the thighs or face, which is typical of this period. Soot was used for tattooing as it is sterile and easy to source.

Illustration: after S.I. Rudenko

Male headgear

As the damage to this intimidating headgear corresponds with the fatal wounds on the man's head, it may have been worn by the Pazyryk chief in his final battle. The carving depicts the head of a fantastic eagle, holding a deer's head in its beak, with figures on either side carrying geese. These elements were part of a complex headgear, a decorated felt cap topped with an elaborate wooden crest.

Late 4th – early 3rd century BC

Burial mound 2, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia

Wood, leather

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Image caption: Reconstruction of the Pazyryk chief's headdress. The crest originally rose above a cap decorated on either side with leather appliques showing a bird of prey attacking a deer.

© E.V. Stepanova

Decorated neck torc

This neck ornament had been worn by the Pazyryk chief, but was badly damaged when the tomb was looted in antiquity. It consists of a hollow copper tube, with the addition of carved ends representing three pairs of crouching winged and horned lions ('lion griffins'). The wooden heads with antlers were made separately. The torc was once covered in gold foil: it may have been an imitation of a solid gold object and made just for the tomb.

Late 4th – early 3rd century BC

Burial mound 2, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia

Bronze, horn, wood

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

False beard

This beard was found beneath the chief's body at Pazyryk. It is made of human hair sewn on to a strap and originally tied at the back. It had been dyed to take on a dark chestnut colour. Greek and Persian depictions of Scythians usually show them as bearded, yet all of the mummies found in

Pazyryk were clean-shaven. It is possible these false beards had a ritual role in the funeral.

Late 4th – early 3rd century BC

Burial mound 2, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia

Hair, sinew thread, leather

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Man's leather riding boot

Long boots like this were worn by men, women and children in the Altai region. The toecaps, heels and calves were made separately and were then sewn together with animal sinew. This type of stitching was also used on belts and fur coats, ensuring that the leatherwork was strong. Judging by depictions, these boots were worn in the east, while different types of footwear were worn by western Scythians in the Black Sea region.

Late 6th – early 5th century BC

Burial mound 2, Bashadar, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia

Leather

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

World of the Scythians

Man's squirrel-fur coat

The majority of fur coats excavated in the Altai region belonged to chiefs and were made from squirrel, sable or Siberian weasel fur, unlike the sheepskin clothing worn by most people. This coat is decorated with fine appliqués in the form of a pair of deer heads with whimsical antlers, topped with the heads of fantastic eagles, and the antlers finished with gold-leaf circles. The fur trim, originally dyed purple, has diagonal rows of leather circles and gold leaf sewn on.

Late 4th – early 3rd century BC

Burial mound 2, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia

Fur

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Family label:

Frozen fashion

These items of clothing are from a Scythian's grave. They have survived because the ground in which they were buried froze. Scythians spent hours in the open air and needed comfortable, warm clothes.

What could people tell about your life from the clothes you wear?

1 Woman's headdress ornament

This was one of four wooden pins found with the chief's consort in burial mound 2 at Pazyryk. All were carved into the shape of a deer, with separate leather antlers and ears. Two were covered with gold foil. They were originally fixed to the top of a tall headdress.

Pins like this are typical of womens' burials in the Altai region. However, rather than just one pin, four were found here: it is possible that this woman's headdress was more elaborate than those worn by common Pazyryk women.

Late 4th – early 3rd century BC

Burial mound 2, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia

Wood, leather, gold, iron

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

2 Woman's headdress and hair-case

Eastern Scythian women wore distinctive tall headdresses. They shaved off most of their hair, apart from a portion on the top of the head. This was braided, drawn through holes in a cap, and tied with horsehair into a tall standing cone.

The woman from burial mound 2 at Pazyryk had a shaved head, but fragments of her wig were discovered, which included cords threaded through a pair of hair-cases. Other finds suggest that crocheted hair-cases were common amongst Scythian women in this region.

Headdress: 3rd century BC

Wood, leather, hair, wool, felt, silk

Crocheted wool hair-case: late 4th – early 3rd century BC

Burial mounds 5 and 2, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains, Siberia

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

3 Single-sided wooden comb

This comb was carved from three sections of wood and has a central plate with 19 teeth sandwiched between a pair of plates. Other finds including horn combs suggest that combing was not unusual. The heads of the bodies in the burial mounds at Pazyryk had been shaved, but this was probably part of the funerary ceremonies, as Greek and Persian representations invariably show Scythian men as long-haired and bearded.

7th century BC

Arzhan-2, Tuva region, southern Siberia

Wood

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

4 Decorated woman's shoe

This shoe is exceptionally richly decorated. The care taken to decorate the sole is understandable given that people sat on the ground and their soles were highly visible. The outer sole is made of leather wrapped in red cloth and decorated with pyrite crystals, perforated with holes less than a millimetre across. The skill that allowed for the precise drilling of these is astonishing. The toe is stitched with thick sinew wrapped with tin foil which imitates silver.

Late 4th – early 3rd century BC

Burial mound 2, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia

Leather, textile, animal sinew, tin,
pyrite crystals, gold foil, glass beads

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg



5 Woman's coat

This woman's fur coat from the Pazyryk burial is made of carefully trimmed squirrel skins, with the fur on the inside and carefully stitched together with animal sinew. The coat was decorated on the outside with strips of light-coloured leather onto which were sewn openwork leather appliqués with minute sinew stitching around each piece. Copper plaques, originally covered in gold foil, were also added. Most of the gold was lost during the ancient looting of this tomb.

Late 4th – early 3rd century BC

Burial mound 2, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia

Squirrel fur, leather, animal sinew

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

6 Woman's stockings

Long felt stockings are a typical element of Scythian nomadic costume. They were worn by both men and women, and three pairs were found in this tomb. Preserved by the Siberian permafrost, it is exceptionally rare for textiles as old as this to survive. They were decorated around the top with appliquéd strips of felt decorated with woollen thread embroidery. Similar stockings were worn by both genders, but the quality of these examples reflects the higher social status of the people buried here.

Late 4th – early 3rd century BC

Burial mound 2, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia

Felt

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

1-4 A man's tools

Belts were used to hold everyday tools, such as knives and awls. They were also considered to have a protective function in averting evil. Scythian belts were usually decorated with pairs of matching metal buckle plaques in the centre. These were also status symbols for their owner.

The decoration on this belt stands out because of its unique style. The stitches are wrapped in tin leaf (creating the illusion of silver), fine appliqués covered in gold leaf have been sewn inside the embroidered features, and imported silver plaques re-used as decoration.

Metal tools and weapons were sharpened using whetstones, which are commonly found in Scythian warrior graves. This elaborate example has not been used and has led some scholars to suggest it was intended instead as a touchstone, used to test the purity of gold by marking the stone with the metal.

World of the Scythians

Whips were used for horse riding and were also a sign of status among nomads. The carved whip handle depicts a leopard attacking a horse.

1 Decorated leather belt

4 Wooden whip handle

Late 4th – early 3rd century BC

Burial mound 2, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains,
southern Siberia

2 Whetstone: stone with gold handle

350–325 BC

Chertomlyk burial mound, Dnieper region,
northern Black Sea

3 Knife, awl and sheath: copper alloy, leather, wood

6th–3rd century BC

Aymyrlyg burial ground, Sayan-Altai region,
southern Siberia

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

1 Woman's skirt fragment

Horizontal strips of woollen material were used to make this fragment of clothing, which is probably part of a skirt. The pieces have identical weave patterns, but are dyed differently. The red strip was dyed using the crushed dried bodies of kermes insects, and madder, a popular plant dye. Indigo, sorrel and tannin were used for the green. Ancient robbers ripped the clothing off the bodies in this burial, so little has survived.

Late 4th – early 3rd century BC

Burial mound 2, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia

Wool

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

2-5 Early Scythian textile fragments

These woollen fragments are some of the oldest surviving examples of Scythian cloth. Of exceptional quality, it is unknown whether they were made locally or imported. They were found in a large burial structure at Arzhan-1, an archaeological site dated to the late 9th or early 8th century BC.

The fragments were woven using different techniques and dyed green, blue, yellow, red and orange. The red is mainly derived from madder, a common plant, while the blue comes from indigo.

850–800 BC

Grave 1, chamber 1, Arzhan-1, Tuva region, southern Siberia
Wool

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Image caption: The striped woollen cloth (2) has been stitched together from pieces of fine material. The four colours and dense, textured weave are clearly visible in this digital microscope image.

© Trustees of the British Museum

Image caption: This digital microscope image shows the remarkable preservation of the coarse and fine weave of the woollen cloth (3). Blue-dyed areas contrast well with the other colours of the geometric design.

© Trustees of the British Museum

High-status clothing

These three items of clothing belonged to high-status individuals buried separately at Tuekta in the Altai region. The ornamental gold stripe originally decorated a woman's garment. Precious metal rarely survives as it was sought after by ancient tomb robbers.

The narrow false sleeve (left) is decorated with sewn-on leather appliqués covered in gold leaf. Men's garments with narrow sleeves such as this were worn like capes and have been found exclusively in chiefs' burials.

The trousers were made of carefully worked fine leather. They are decorated with a stripe of black

World of the Scythians

foal skin and openwork strips of leather covered in gold leaf. The fur shows copper oxide staining, perhaps from applied decorative metal plaques that no longer survive.

Leather sleeve

Leather and fur trousers

5th century BC

Burial mound 1, Tuekta, Altai Mountains,
southern Siberia

Gold stripe

5th century BC

Burial mound 2, Tuekta, Altai Mountains,
southern Siberia

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Quote on wall:

The Sacae [a Scythian tribe] wore trousers and tall pointed hats set upright on their heads, and were armed with the bows of their country, daggers and ... battle-axes.

Herodotus (about 484–425 BC), Greek historian

An ancient people

The Scythians were pastoral nomads. They relied on herding sheep, goats, horses and cattle, not only for food and drink, but also for plentiful supplies of leather, wool and hair to make everyday goods. Other objects such as the gold plaques were made by master craftspeople. They traded these goods with their settled neighbours in return for items which they could not produce themselves, such as pottery and wine. These interactions must have been tense at times as the Scythians also carried out raids on border areas. Tribes often fought one another, but also collaborated when it was to their advantage to do so.

The Scythians buried their wealth with their dead. Most tombs were robbed long ago, but recent excavations in the Tuva region revealed an incredibly rich early Scythian burial mound at Arzhan-2.

Image caption: Reconstructions of a high-status man and woman from the main burial chamber at Arzhan-2 in the Tuva region of southern Siberia. Some of their belongings are displayed nearby.
Drawing: D.V. Pozdnjakov

Image caption: The bodies of the man and woman in the main burial chamber at Arzhan-2.
© Eurasien-Abteilung, DAI

Image caption: Birch trees in spring,
Altai, Siberia
© Pavel Filatov / Alamy Stock Photo

1 Leather pouch and nail clippings

This pouch was found inside a burial chamber. It contained human nail clippings and had been carefully wrapped up. Judging by the shape and the fact there are ten nails, they were probably cut at the same time, perhaps not long before death or as part of the funerary rites. The same tomb also contained a sewn-up package of human hair collected from a comb. They were probably buried because of a superstition that a person's spirit could be controlled through access to his or her nails or hair.

Late 4th – early 3rd century BC

Burial mound 2, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia

Leather, wool, human remains

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

2, 3 Sable fur pouch, leather purse and horn container

These objects were found in one tomb at Pazyryk. The rounded fur pouch is made from sable fur: the front is made from the animals' backs and is dark, whereas the reverse consists of small rectangular fragments of lighter and poorer quality fur from their bellies. It was found empty but the small purse and small horn container originally held black dye, and the same dye was used to colour the false beard of the man buried in this tomb.

Late 4th – early 3rd century BC

Burial mound 2, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Image label: The forests of southern Siberia are rich in sables (pictured), foxes and squirrels, the furs of which were used by the Scythians.

1,2 Bronze mirrors

The first mirror, cast from tin bronze and then highly polished, now has a silvery appearance on the reflective surface. Five deer and a goat shown in profile decorate the handle, in a style that resembles earlier rock art. A small loop handle on the back broke in antiquity.

The second mirror has a loop-shaped handle in the form of two big cats fighting each other. Shown partly in profile and partly from the front, their curved tails and heads with pointed ears are emphasised, and even the claws are shown on one paw. The leaf-shaped settings on their haunches and shoulders possibly held coloured inlays.

8th–7th century BC

Bukhtarma, western Altai Mountains, southern Siberia

5th–4th century BC

Burial mound 13, Sagly-Bazhi II cemetery, western Tuva, southern Siberia

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

3,4 Mirrors with handles

Mirrors shaped like this were used by the Scythians, and more widely from Egypt to the Middle East, from the third millennium BC onwards. Metal mirrors had to be highly polished to be effective. As they were easily scratched, they were often kept in leather containers or soft pouches, including leopard skin.

Mirrors are often found in the graves of Scythian men and women. They may have had more of a magical than a practical purpose. Both the man and woman in the elite burial at Arzhan-2 had a bronze mirror placed in front of their faces.

The missing handle from the mirror on the left must have been made of an organic material, such as horn or wood, which did not survive. The ribbed metal handle of the second mirror is decorated with Scythian figures of a boar and a feline.

3 3rd century BC

Tjutrinski burial mound

Copper alloy (organic handle not preserved)

4 About 600 BC

Kuban region, north Caucasus (chance find)

Copper alloy

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

1, 2 Carved horn belt clasps

The pair of clasps show ibexes with twisted hindquarters, and one (right) has the additional figure of a goat. The other buckle shows a reclining horse. Four small holes at the neck and tail were used to attach the plaque to a leather belt, and the larger opening in the centre probably secured a clasp.

6th–3rd century BC

Aymyrlyg burial ground, Sayan-Altai region,
southern Siberia

5th century BC

Burial mound 13, Sagly-Bazhi II, western Tuva,
southern Siberia

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

3-5 Gold decorative plaques

Typical of animal-style decorative art, the gold deer plaques with turquoise inlays (3) were mounted on quivers containing arrows. The circular plaques (4) depict coiled feline predators.

The tiny decorative plaques (5) depict a human head wearing a distinctive headdress with a rounded crest. It is not certain how they were used.

750–650 BC

Burial mound 5, Chilikty, eastern Kazakhstan

Late 3rd century BC

Burial mound 1, Bugry, Tuva region

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Bronze decorative plaques

These Scythian plaques from southern Siberia are similar to examples found in northern China, reflecting close connections between the two areas.

The circular plaque depicts a crouching predator. Such images appeared from about 800 BC, at the very beginning of nomadic decorative art.

The second plaque represents a tiger with a ram's head in its mouth.

8th–7th century BC

5th–4th century BC

Chance finds, southern Siberia

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Deer plaques

Typical of the animal-style decorative art found from northern China to Hungary, deer plaques were mounted on quivers containing arrows.

Other examples were attached to clothing, possibly as status symbols. The significance of the deer is uncertain, although some scholars think they may represent celestial deer worshipped as gods.

8th–6th century BC

Krasnoyarsk region and Minusinsk valley, southern Siberia

Bronze

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

**Tall showcase ahead on left,
continues on far side:**

1-3 Elaborate gold earrings

Most Scythian tombs were robbed in antiquity but occasionally intact tombs are found that contain rich grave-goods, such as these earrings. The gold earring decorated with granulation has small holes punched through the bottom, which were used to suspend a series of small turquoise beads held on with sinew.

The more elaborate earring is part of a pair from a recently excavated woman's grave in western Kazakhstan. The gold loops on the bottom support granulated and elongated bud-like drops. Like the earring from Arzhan-2, the incomplete pair, possibly a Persian import, has been crudely repaired in antiquity.

1 7th century BC

Arzhan 2, Tuva region, southern Siberia

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

2 Early 5th century BC

Burial mound 6, Taksai-I, Kazakhstan

National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Astana

3 Late 4th – early 3rd century BC

Burial mound 2, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Image caption: Close-up view of an earring from the incomplete pair showing granulation, a traditional decorative technique created by soldering small spheres of solid gold to the base sheet.

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Image caption: Detail of the same earring showing cloisonné, a decorative technique where small compartments separated by strips of gold are inlaid with cut gemstones, or glass and coloured pastes as shown here.

© Trustees of the British Museum

4 Shoe ornament

This spectacular ornament once adorned the shoe of a woman buried in the main chamber of the rich burial at Arzhan-2. Outlined with gold wire, the central cells are inlaid with glass, which was originally light bluish-green to imitate turquoise, while the front is covered with gold granulation.

The high value of the gold objects she was buried with indicate that the woman was of similar high status to the chief with whom she was buried.

7th century BC

Arzhan-2, Tuva region, southern Siberia

Gold, glass

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Necklaces and beads

The necklaces and beads from different Scythian burials in southern Siberia display a wide range of colours and materials, including beads of Baltic amber and carnelian beads with white designs. The latter were made using a technique invented in the Indus region (modern day Pakistan and north-west India) and later widely used across

Iran, Central Asia and the Caucasus.

7th century BC; Arzhan-2, Tuva region, southern Siberia
Gold, amber, stone; glass and stone; etched carnelian

3rd century BC; Burial mound 3, Shibe, southern Siberia
White paste

3rd century BC; Aymyrlyg burial ground, Tuva region,
southern Siberia
Carnelian and glass (?); glass

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Image caption: The etched carnelian beads have been decorated by painting designs onto them using an alkaline substance and heating them in an oven. They may have been made in Central Asia or Iran.

© Trustees of the British Museum

Image caption: Scientific analysis has shown that the 'eye' beads are made from glass which originated on the Eastern Mediterranean coast. They were produced by winding molten glass around an iron rod.

© Trustees of the British Museum

Gold clothing appliqués

These tiny gold plaques were made using punches, which meant that identical sets could be made very quickly. They are part of a much larger set, originally sewn onto the clothing of the chief in the burial mound at Arzhan-2. The amount of gold found here indicates his high status. The crouching predator figure the plaques depict may have been chosen to emphasise his power.

7th century BC

Arzhan-2, Tuva region, southern Siberia

Gold

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Image caption: Reconstruction of how the feline appliqués were arranged when worn by the chief, based on their position **in situ** at Arzhan-2.

Photo: A. Bronnikov, 2015

Gold ornaments

These recently excavated objects, one with the head of a bird of prey and the other a stylized eagle griffin, were found in 2010–11. They are thought to belong to elite individuals of a local nomad culture found in the steppe region of central Kazakhstan. The style of the objects and the vast quantity of other gold ornaments found in the tomb suggest close connections with the Scythian culture of the Altai region to the north.

7th or early 6th century BC

Burial mound 2 and 5, Taldy-2, Karkaraly district,

Karagandy region, central Kazakhstan

National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Astana

Gold plaque: battle between horseman and foot soldier

The plaque, which may have decorated a bridle, is a rare example of local Scythian art in the northern Black Sea region. Carrying bow cases on their thighs, both warriors are wearing knee-length scale armour tunics, shin guards and Greek helmets with nose guards, large cheek plates and conical crests. The way the horseman is holding his spear suggests he belonged to a group of heavily armed ancient warriors called cataphracts, usually thought to be a later type of warrior.

4th century BC

Geremesov burial mound, Dnieper region,
northern Black Sea

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Gold plaque and clothing appliqués

The plaque, originally riveted onto the upper part of a wooden bowl, shows a hero figure wrestling lions. Although found in ancient Near Eastern art, this scene was probably borrowed from Greek art of about the 6th century BC.

The scene on the appliqué, showing a lion attacking a deer, is typical of Scythian art. Seven such plaques were discovered at Chertomlyk, contrasting with the much larger numbers found in other burials.

Possibly 6th century BC

Destroyed burial mound near the hamlet of Tuls kaya,
Kuban region, northern Caucasus

350–325 BC

Chertomlyk burial mound, Dnieper region,
northern Black Sea

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Image caption: A winged figure grappling lions is depicted on the plaque from a wooden bowl.

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Image caption: Gold clothing appliqué showing a lion attacking a deer.

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2017

Information banner ahead on right:

A portable lifestyle

The need to pack up and move easily meant that possessions had to be small and durable. Scythians were accomplished craftspeople, and families often made their own everyday items from felt, cloth, leather and horn. Many probably lived in large tents covered with sheets of birch bark or felt, which would have been rainproof and windproof, but none survive. In the west, they also used covered wagons. Thick floor coverings and sheepskin rugs were essential for sitting and sleeping on. Furniture was minimal and included low, collapsible tables.

Tools, weapons and ornaments were made by professional Scythian metalworkers using gold, bronze and iron. The work was highly skilled, but did not require a large toolkit. Skilled woodworkers built carts and complex burial chambers. Anything the nomads could not produce themselves, they acquired through trade, plunder or dowry.

Image caption: Wigwam tents covered in birch bark used by herders in the Pazyryk valley, 1927.

© Archives of the Institute for the History of Material Culture, St Petersburg

Image caption: Women fluffing wool to make felt, Altai region, 1899.

© Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kustkamera), Russian Academy of Sciences

Continue on left:

Hemp-smoking set

Hemp-smoking sets were found in each of the chief's tombs at Pazyryk. The brazier contained heat-cracked stones and charred hemp seeds.

It was never polished after casting so may have been made especially for the grave. The six-rod stand was originally held together with a strap threaded through the holes at the top. A leather flask containing hempseed was tied to one of the rods.

The felt may have been a cover for the stand. The hem would not have reached the ground and would have allowed the smoke quickly to reach anyone sitting on the ground nearby.

Although hemp-smoking sets have only been found in chiefs' graves, the mineral content of the common Pazyryks' hair suggest the practice involved entire communities.

Cover: felt, textile

3rd century BC

Burial mound 3, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia

Stand: Wood, leather

Brazier: arsenical copper

Hemp seeds

Late 4th – early 3rd century BC

Burial mound 2, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

On a framework of three sticks, meeting at the top they stretch pieces of woollen cloth, taking care to get the joins as perfect as they can, and inside this little tent they put a dish with red-hot stones in it. Then they take some hemp seed ... and throw the seed on to the hot stones. At once it begins to smoke, giving off a vapour unsurpassed ... The Scythians enjoy it so much that they howl with pleasure.

Herodotus (about 484–425 BC), Greek historian

Image caption: This image, taken with a scanning electron microscope, revealed that the hemp seeds displayed here are not charred, unlike other hemp seeds found in copper braziers in the same burial mound.

© Trustees of the British Museum

Looped woollen rug

These fragments of two woollen covers or carpets were found at Pazyryk. They were originally about 42 cm wide and woven with a single warp and two wefts. The cloth was dyed various shades of red with a pigment from cochineal insects.

Similar cloth fragments are known from other burials in Pazyryk and Bashadar, where they covered the bottom of the coffins and the bodies of the corpses. These sites span over 300 years, which suggests that the textiles either belonged to a well-established local craft or were imported over a long period.

Late 4th – early 3rd century BC

Burial mound 2, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia

Wool

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

A pillow or a seat?

This decorated leather case was found under the head of a chief buried in Pazyryk. Similar objects were found under the heads of other high-status people buried in Pazyryk and Tuekta. They are rough and rigid so they seem unsuitable as pillows. The excavator believed they were small seats, reused as pillows, but perhaps they were made especially for the grave. Less wealthy Altai burials contain 'pillows' of stone, wood, and leather filled with aromatic plants.

Late 4th – early 3rd century BC

Burial mound 2, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia

Wood, leather, sinew threads

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Sheepskin

Fleece rarely survives and the preservation of this everyday item, due to its burial and preservation in the permafrost, is exceptional. Sheep were an essential part of the pastoral nomadic economy. Sheep- and goat-skins were found in this tomb, both coming from fine-fleeced breeds. Probably the fleece was removed with a knife, and then was processed with soured milk and hand kneaded.

Thick felt made from semi-fine-fleeced sheep has also been discovered, which means that different breeds must have been kept in Altai during the Scythian period.

3rd century BC

Burial mound 5, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia

Sheepskin

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Quote on wall:

**Let us not again this evening
With our shouts and noisy uproar
Get ourselves as drunk as Scythians,
Let's get moderately tipsy
And our best songs sing with fervour.**

Anacreon (about 582–485 BC), Greek poet

Large showcase on left:

Table and table leg in the shape of a predator

Collapsible tables were common in the Pazyryk tombs. They vary in height from 18 to 47 cm but share the same feature of a tray-like oval top and four lathe-turned or hand-carved legs. The legs each had a projection (tenon) at the top which was inserted into a corresponding cavity (mortice). This and all the table tops from burial mound 2 were coloured red with cinnabar in imitation of Chinese lacquer.

Late 4th – early 3rd century BC

Burial mound 2, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia

Wood

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Vessel with relief decoration

Small numbers of pottery flasks, jars and bowls were regularly placed with the dead. These vessels were handmade and unevenly fired. The partial blackening implies they were fired in bonfire kilns where the pottery came into direct contact with the fuel. Decoration was simple but in some cases included light incision, grooving, painting or applied coils, as on this example from the Scythian cemetery at Aymyrlyg.

6th–3rd century BC

Aymyrlyg burial ground, Sayan-Altai region, southern Siberia
Pottery

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Wooden drinking bowl and felt ring

This type of drinking bowl, typical of Scythian sites in the Altai region, is found in royal tombs as well as everyday graves. This example has a detachable handle. Felt rings were intended to steady the bases of drinking-vessels. They are made of twisted strips of felt, and sewn with twisted or plaited sinew threads.

Drinking bowl: 5th century BC

Tuekta-1, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia

Ring: late 4th – early 3rd century BC

Burial mound 2, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Pottery flask and felt ring

Each of the tombs in the second burial at Pazyryk contained one or two flasks like this. There are no visible residues inside, but they may have been used for koumiss, a drink of fermented mare's milk. The vessels are believed to have been made by villagers living in the forest-steppe region north of the Altai Mountains and may have been acquired through barter.

Most felt rings were individual and functioned like place mats. This unusual example was sewn onto a floor covering, of which only this portion survives.

Late 4th – early 3rd century BC

Burial mound 2, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Cauldron decorated with rams

Cauldrons are found in hoards and high-status burials, showing that they were symbolically significant. This cauldron is a rare type of nomadic bronze vessel known exclusively from the Tian Shan borderland (between present-day China and Kyrgyzstan). It was found by chance – none have been discovered in archaeological excavations. The distinctive shape may have originated in ancient China.

5th–2nd century BC

Semirech'e, south-east Kazakhstan (chance find)

Bronze

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg



Cauldron with Greek decoration

The cauldron combines the usual features of such vessels of 500–300 BC with an entirely unique decoration which incorporates Greek patterns.

Bronze cauldrons were cast by the Scythians in clay moulds. In nomadic daily life such objects, even if used for mundane tasks like preparing food, also had ritual significance. Herodotus describes a giant bronze cauldron cast by order of the Scythian ruler Ariantas.

Early 4th century BC

Raskopana Mogila burial mound, Dnieper region,
northern Black Sea

Cast bronze

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Information banner on left:

Food, drink and merriment

Feasting was an essential part of Scythian funeral ceremonies and must also have been important in the social bonding of individuals and tribes.

The Scythian diet relied heavily on milk, butter and cheese. They drank fermented mare's milk, and in the Black Sea region to the west they imported Greek wine. They mainly ate mutton, but also had beef and horse meat, preserved by drying, smoking or freezing. The ancient Greek historian Herodotus recounts the Scythians using bones as fuel – they give off little smoke so would have been ideal in a tent.

Herodotus also described a Scythian ritual that involved inhaling hemp smoke, performed after a chief's funeral. This may have been for cleansing, but hemp smoke is also known for its pain-relieving properties. Tomb finds include miniature tents, scorched stones and hemp seeds.

Image caption: Tiny plaque depicting two Scythian men sharing a drinking horn.

© The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, 2017. Photo: V. Terebenin

Image caption: Reconstruction of a Scythian woman with a brazier, based on finds from burial mound 2 at Pazyryk in the Altai region.

Drawing: D.V. Pozdnjakov

Image caption:

Forest in evening light, Siberia

© Anna Grigorjeva

Gold dress plaques

This image of two Scythians sharing a drinking horn may illustrate Herodotus' account of the Scythian custom of swearing pledges:

They take blood from the parties to the agreement by making a little hole or cut in the body with an awl or knife, and pour it mixed with wine into a great earthenware bowl, wherein they then dip ... arrows and an axe and a javelin; and when this is done the makers of the sworn agreement themselves, and the most honourable of their followers, drink of the blood ... [invoking evil upon anyone who breaks the pledge].

400–380 BC, Solokha, northern Black Sea
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Drinking like the Greeks

Originally known as 'milk drinkers', Scythians probably adopted wine consumption from Greeks. They soon acquired a reputation for excessive drinking of undiluted wine, which contrasted with the Greek habit of mixing wine with water.

After the establishment of the first Greek colonies around the Black Sea in about 700 BC, trade and exchange developed between locals and the new settlers.

From about 550 BC, Greek wares such as these increasingly found their way inland along large rivers. Scythian elite burials began to contain imports including wine amphorae, perfume containers, and metalwork made specifically for Scythian consumers.

500–450 BC

Burial mound 401, near the village of Zhurovka
by the Dnieper River, northern Black Sea

Athenian black-glazed pottery drinking cup (**kylix**)

Greek pottery amphora from Chios

Bronze ladle

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Showcase behind you:

Coriander seeds and sheep vertebra

Coriander seeds have been found in several burials, including one where they were found charred on top of a brazier. This proves that rather than simply being a condiment, they were burnt as part of a ritual. Coriander grows wild in Central Asia and it was probably from there that these seeds were brought. Joints of meat were a standard food offering in Scythian tombs, usually of mutton placed in a dish.

Late 4th – early 3rd century BC

Burial mound 2, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Bone spoon

The carving on this spoon is typical of animal-style art. A predator with its head reversed crouches with its feet on the left side of the handle. Three birds are shown at the top end, two represented simply by their heads and long beaks.

An almost identical spoon found with another burial in the Aktobe region was probably carved by the same person.

6th–5th century BC

Nagornensk burial, Aktobe region, north-west Kazakhstan
National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Astana

Decorated bag containing lumps of cheese

This bag, containing very well-preserved lumps of cheese, was found with horse burials at Pazyryk. It presumably had been attached to one of the saddles.

Early analyses could not determine the animal's milk from which the cheese was made. Cow, yak, sheep and goat milk could have been used and indeed mixed, as it still was by local pastoralists in the mid-20th century.

Late 4th – early 3rd century BC

Burial mound 2, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia
Leather

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

World of the Scythians

Family label:

Best before: 300 BC

The strange lumps found inside this bag are 2,300-year-old cheese! The Scythians could not grow crops in Siberia so they ate lots of cheese, butter, meat and milk from their animals. They enjoyed eating together.

If you ate like a Scythian, which foods would you miss?

Horse power

Horses were vital to the Scythian way of life. They not only provided milk, meat and hide, but were the main means of transport and the driving force behind the nomads' military might. The Scythians excelled in breeding horses for speed and endurance. Horses were exchanged and bartered, and large herds were a sign of high status.

As accomplished riders, Scythian men and women were forever perfecting their horse gear. They developed new types of horse bit, harness and saddle that gave riders better control. Riding horses were well cared for and often lived to fifteen or more years. Smaller herd ponies had to find their own grazing, even under winter snow.

Some frozen burials contain elaborately decorated horses that were killed during their owner's funeral, suggesting the close partnership between horse and rider was believed to continue in the afterlife.

Image caption: Reconstruction of a Scythian warrior from the Altai region, based on finds from Verkh-Khaldjin-2.

Drawing: D.V. Pozdnjakov

Image caption: Left: Reconstruction of three sets of horse equipment from different periods:

1. Burial mound 2, Bashadar
2. Burial mound 1, Pazyryk
3. Burial mound 3, Pazyryk

Drawing: E.V. Stepanov

Image caption: Below: Detail of a row of 14 bridled horses, buried in the elite man and woman's burial mound at Arzhan-2, Tuva region, southern Siberia.

© Eurasien-Abteilung, DAI

Family label:

Lucky charm

This gold plaque was sewn onto clothing or a headdress. The horseman shows us what some Scythian warriors wore.

Can you find the hare?

Hares were important to Scythians – it was said that they would bring good luck in battle.

1,2 Gold plaques with Scythian horsemen

Many of these plaques have been excavated in Scythian burials. They were originally attached to clothing and headgear. The warrior's jacket (1) is covered with circles that may represent the sewn-on plaques of actual clothing.

The horseman (2) wears characteristic Scythian dress. A hare crouches at his horse's hooves. This may be a regular hunting scene, yet, according to Iranian popular beliefs, sacrificing a hare brought victory in battle. Hares often feature on Scythian gold plaques, demonstrating the animal's importance.

400–350 BC, Bosporan Kingdom
Kul Oba burial mound, northern Black Sea region
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

**... a hare ran out between the armies;
and every Scythian that saw it gave chase ...
Darius asked what the enemy meant by this
clamour; and when he heard that they were
chasing the hare, then said ... 'These fellows
hold us in deep contempt'.**

Herodotus, on the 513 BC invasion of Scythia
by Darius, King of Persia (522–486 BC)

Spear head

Spears were the predominant type of weapon in the north-west Caucasus during the Scythian period. Finds from royal burials, as well as from regular cemeteries, show that both chiefs and common soldiers used them.

7th century BC

Burial 26, Kelermes, Kuban region, north-west Caucasus

Forged iron

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Showcase on right:

Mask for a horse

In the Altai region, Scythian horses were dressed-up as part of funeral ceremonies, transforming them into fantastic mythical animals. This felt and leather horse mask is topped by a ram's head with a cockerel between its horns. The peak is decorated with fish made of gold leaf.

The horse masks found in Pazyryk burials varied greatly. Some were open at the front, others entirely covered the horse's face. All were tied under the chin and had horns.

On earlier examples these resembled goat horns. Later, they began to include antlers and finials shaped like griffins.

Masks and other components of the 'mythical make-up' were mainly used on riding horses which, having been transformed into hoofed griffins, were intended to carry their rider into the afterlife.

Late 4th – early 3rd century BC

Burial mound 1, Pazyryk, Altai region, southern Siberia

Felt, leather, wood, gold coat

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg



Cast bronze ‘pole tops’

‘Pole tops’ are frequently found in Scythian burials. They were used in funerary rituals and were probably also attached to horses or carts. They have small bells or balls contained within a hollow cage, so they would have tinkled when used. The deer figure on one of the oldest examples is typical of early animal-style art. The griffin on another example resembles those from eastern Greece. By the 6th century BC, most had several bells and a flat-topped cage with a Scythian-style animal figure on the top.

Bell and deer figurine

700-650 BC

Burial mound near the village of Makhoshevskaya,
Kuban region, north-west Caucasus

Bell and griffin’s head

7th century BC

Burial mound 3, Kelermes, Kuban region,
north-west Caucasus

Bird of prey

6th century BC

Burial mound 2 near the village of Ulsky,
Kuban region, north-west Caucasus

Openwork bell

700-650 BC

Burial mound 2, Kelermes, Kuban region,
north-west Caucasus

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Finials: mountain goat and elk

The finials were cast in bronze. The first was attached to a wooden shaft, but its function is uncertain. The second is incomplete, but it may have been the pommel of a dagger. It is also the earliest in a large collection of chance finds made in the 18th century in the Yenisei region.

8th century BC

Chamber 26, Arzhan-1, Tuva region;

Chance find, Yenisei region, southern Siberia

Bronze

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

1 Felt swan

Four identical felt swans were uncovered with the horses in burial mound 5 at Pazyryk. A dismantled cart and a felt hanging showing a horseman and a seated woman were also found. There are different ideas about the function of the cart and hanging. One is that the felt was erected as an outdoor enclosure with the swans at the corners, inside which the body was prepared for burial. Another is that the swans belonged to the four corners of the cart's cabin, which was roofed with black felt.

3rd century BC

Burial mound 5, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

2 Carved griffins and a predator biting a goat

These wooden horse-gear ornaments were originally covered with tin or gold foil. The griffin with extended wings and the carefully carved head were worn on different sets of horse gear. Griffins are common in Scythian art of the Altai Mountain region. The harness pendant is from a series representing the stylized head of a goat, being bitten by a feline turned backwards.

4th to 3rd century BC

Burial mound 11, Berel, northern Kazakhstan

Wood

National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Astana

3 Horse-bit and cheekpiece

Jointed horse-bits with a ring on either side are commonplace today. They work on the principle that by pulling on the reins (attached to the rings), direct pressure can be applied to the horse's lower jaw to control its movements. Applying pressure on one side enables the rider to turn the horse left or right.

Unusually, the cheekpiece has different ends: a wild boar with an elongated snout and the head of an eagle.

6th–5th century BC

Burial mound 12, Kyryk-II, Kazakhstan

Copper alloy

National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Astana

4 Horse-bit, cheekpieces and bridle decorations

The grave at Arzhan-2 contained a large amount of horse gear buried with horses. These include bronze bits, cheekpieces, and bridle ornaments, although the organic parts did not survive. Almost all the bridles had curb-bits, a type of bit which multiplies the pressure applied by the rider, depending on the length of the cheekpieces. The majority of the 14 bridle sets from Arzhan-2 were cast from the same mould.

7th century BC

Arzhan-2, Tuva region, southern Siberia

Bridle set: cheekpieces; bits; remains of leather belt; forehead plate; bridle decorations

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Horse bridle

This is one of two almost identical bridles found with horses in a burial mound at Bashadar in the Altai Mountains. This one has carved wooden pendants and the other has ornaments made of metal, but both sets were covered with gold foil and would have looked identical. The bronze cheekpieces of both bridles were cast from the same mould. The plaque and cheekpiece tips may represent a stylized griffin head. Objects with this decoration are often found in burials of the mid-6th to early 5th centuries BC from the Altai Mountains to the southern Urals, making this design useful for dating other sites.

Late 6th – early 5th century BC

Burial mound 2, Bashadar, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia

Wood, bronze, gold foil

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Horse bridle

The exceptionally well-preserved bridle still has its straps as well as its decorative plaques, including five fantastic eagles. Four intervening plaques are in the form of a ram's head in the jaws of a predator, which has an elongated wolf's snout and curved antlers. The ends of the cheekpieces are decorated with the heads of fantastic eagles. All the wooden and leather parts were once covered with gold and tin leaf, giving a rich appearance.

During the 4th to early 3rd centuries BC, designs relating to predators and rams replaced earlier plant-based decoration. The bridles excavated at Pazyryk – with a noseband, two crown pieces and a pair of chest straps – are similar to those used today by nomad herders in Eurasia.

Late 4th – early 3rd century BC

Burial mound 1, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia

Leather, wood, bronze

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Horse bridle

The bridle is complete with its full set of wooden plaques, cheekpieces and rawhide reins. Its structure is typical of the Scythian period: a double head strap that sat just behind the ears, a nose and a chin strap, and a fork connecting the cheekpieces with the head straps. The plaques and cheekpiece terminals were made to look like fantastic eagle heads.

The bit, which was placed in the horse's mouth, is made of arsenical bronze. This was produced by adding arsenic to copper, which resulted in a stronger final product than other types of bronze. Bits such as this, along with examples made of iron, were used in the eastern part of the Scythian territories.

3rd century BC

Burial mound 3, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia

Leather, wood, bronze, gold foil

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Continue around this showcase:

Saddle cover appliqué

This appliqué depicts a tiger attacking an elk. It decorated the saddle cover of a horse buried at Pazyryk. There are no holes so it must have been glued on, which suggests that it was made especially for the funeral.

The elk was covered in tin foil while the tiger was dyed yellow with details painted in brown. The cover had one of these appliqués on each side. It was also decorated with fish-shaped leather pendants.

Late 4th – early 3rd century BC

Burial mound 1, Pazyryk, Altai region, southern Siberia

Leather

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Fish-shaped saddle pendant

This is one of four pendants from a decorative saddle cover. It is in the shape of a fish holding a ram's head in its mouth. Long pendants are typical of early to mid-Pazyryk culture. They were usually shaped like a fish or wolf-like predator. All had a leather base, onto which felt, gold leaf or foil were sewn or glued. They were made especially for the funeral.

Late 4th – early 3rd century BC

Burial mound 1, Pazyryk, Altai region, southern Siberia

Felt, leather, gold

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Saddle-cover fragment

Scythian saddles were sometimes decorated with felt covers held on by thin straps. The covers were adorned with plaques, pendants and appliqués made of felt and leather. This cover was made by stitching together multicoloured felt triangles with sinew thread. Small pieces of felt, textile, leather and fur were used to sew covers and garments alike.

Late 6th – early 5th century BC

Burial mound 2, Bashadar, Altai Mountains,
southern Siberia

Felt

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Saddle cover with a griffin design

This striking decorative griffin is made from small pieces of coloured felt and the details are embroidered with chain stitch. The cover is trimmed with blue felt piping. Griffin images were extremely rare in the Altai region before the late 4th century BC. They were perhaps inspired by the art of Greek states founded in Central Asia after the campaigns of Alexander the Great in 329–328 BC. It is possible that some nomads from the Altai Mountains campaigned in this region at the time.

Late 4th – early 3rd century BC

Burial mound 2, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia

Felt

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Saddle-cover decoration showing eagles

The felt decoration is part of a red saddle cover which was decorated with yellow and blue figures of eagles sewn in a chequer pattern. The contours and detail of the birds on this fragment have been stitched carefully with wool. Decorative Scythian saddle covers were made from materials including leather and fur, but most were felt.

Late 6th – early 5th century BC

Burial mound 2, Bashadar, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia

Felt

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Winged bull saddle decoration

This exceptionally preserved fragment of embroidery shows a rearing or leaping winged bull and was originally attached to a saddle-cloth. Brown and blue-green colours were used to highlight the wing feathers.

The winged bull is a well-known mythical Persian creature of the 5th century BC. It found its way into the Scythian art of the Altai region at Berel where it was locally adopted and adapted.

Late 4th – early 3rd century BC

Burial mound 11, Berel, Kazakhstan

Woollen embroidery

National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Astana

Saddle decoration

All Scythian saddles had four semi-circular supports formed by shaping the saddle stuffing.

In the Altai region during the late 6th to 5th centuries BC saddle supports were often covered with felt medallions depicting fantastic eagles.

This decorative medallion shows a spiral design consisting of eagle's heads with ears (each of the pointed curves being a beak).

Late 6th – early 5th century BC

Burial mound 2, Bashadar, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia

Felt

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

1 Felt swan

Four identical felt swans were uncovered with the horses in burial mound 5 at Pazyryk. A dismantled cart and a felt hanging showing a horseman and a seated woman were also found. There are different ideas about the function of the cart and hanging. One is that the felt was erected as an outdoor enclosure with the swans at the corners, inside which the body was prepared for burial. Another is that the swans belonged to the four corners of the cart's cabin, which was roofed with black felt.

3rd century BC

Burial mound 5, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

2 Horse mask finial

This wooden finial would have topped a horse mask. It once had ears and stylised antlers made of thick leather. It probably depicts the head of a hoofed griffin – a fantastic beast combining the features of hoofed animals with a bird's head and

fantastic horns. Originally it was covered in gold leaf and partially dyed red with cinnabar pigment.

3rd century BC

Burial mound 3, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia

Wood, leather, gold foil

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

3 Cheetah head ‘ornament’

This ‘ornament’ was found with a set of horse gear in a Pazyryk burial. Its use is unclear but it probably adorned a horse’s mask. The top is made from the fur of a cheetah’s head and the eyes are indicated by red cloth patches. The bottom is made of leather covered with fine openwork appliqué. This is not the only Pazyryk item made of feline fur. Until the early 20th century, the Asiatic cheetah was found in the nearby desert of the Caspian region and leopards lived in the Altai Mountains.

Late 4th – early 3rd century BC

Burial mound 1, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia

Fur, leather, textile, stuffed with grass

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

4 Boar's fang pendants

Boar's fang pendants were used as decoration and are found on horse bridles and chest straps, either singly or in lines or groups. As many as 60 boar fangs were used on horse gear found in burial mound 10 at Bashadar. Occasionally, boar's fangs were used to decorate belts worn by Scythian nomads.

850–700 BC

Arzhan-1, Tuva, southern Siberia

Tooth

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Horse tails

When Scythians died their personal riding horses were killed and buried with them. DNA analyses show that the horses were from different herds, suggesting they were probably gifts from other tribes. The tails of the horses at Pazyryk were usually plaited, occasionally knotted, and the hair at the top of the tail was trimmed.

Some horses were adorned for the afterlife with elaborate regalia intended to transform them into a mythical animal. In these burials the hair was shaved off the tail and the top was inserted into a decorated sheath like the example shown here. The sheath is trimmed with blue fur and a red horsehair fringe. It was sewn from leather strips in two alternating colours.

Late 4th – early 3rd century BC

Burial mounds 1–2, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains,
southern Siberia

Horsehair, leather

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Mane cover with appliqué cockerels

This mane cover was worn by a horse buried with its owner at Pazyryk. It is made from a felt rectangle folded in two with a fine leather cover. Glued along the side are four cockerels with gold-leaf heads. The spine of the mane cover has a red horse-hair fringe. Before putting it on, the mane was trimmed and covered with thick felt. The cover was then placed over this base and fastened with straps around the horse's neck.

Late 4th – early 3rd century BC

Burial mound 1, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia

Felt, leather, gold

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Showcase on left:

Saddle chest collar

Chest collars were a Scythian innovation that prevented the saddle from slipping backwards. They were later used by the Parthians, Sasanians and Huns.

Pazyryk saddles had a chest collar worn across the horse's breast and attached to the girth band under the horse's belly. An additional strap fastened at the base of the mane under the rider's hands. This collar is decorated with large plaques representing fantastic eagles and leaf-shaped ornaments, which were originally covered in gold and tin leaf.

Late 4th – early 3rd century BC

Burial mound 1, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia

Leather, wood, gold

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Saddle with sweat-cloth and decorative cover

This saddle is from one of the prized riding horses of a Pazyryk chief. It is a typical soft Scythian saddle, widely used from the 7th century BC until the 2nd century AD.

The Scythians did not use stirrups and the saddle was held on with a girth band. Leather panels packed with hay and deer hair were quilted with horsehair cord and formed a comfortable seat. The saddle has four semi-circular supports, similar to the knee and hip panels of modern saddles. A felt sweat-cloth is strapped to the underside.

The decorated leather cover has a chequerboard pattern in red wool, blue fur, and red leather. There are silk rosettes with gold-leaf centres, and the triangles once had gold-leaf-covered appliqués in the shape of a deer head.

3rd century BC

Burial mound 5, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia
Silk, wool, lacquer, fur, felt, leather, plucked deer hair,
sinew threads, wood, gold

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Image caption: Image of southern Siberian landscape.

© The State Hermitage Museum,
St Petersburg, 2017.

Photo: V. Terebenin

Information banner behind you:

Ancient warriors

Masters of mounted warfare and skilful archers, Scythian men and women were a dangerous enemy. They used a 'Scythian bow' made from composite layers of sinew and wood. This construction was a major advance in weaponry: it created maximum tension when the bow was bent so that the arrows flew faster and further. This was enhanced by new aerodynamic arrowheads that are said to have been dipped in poison to guarantee their deadliness.

Life on the steppe was tough and there was fierce competition between tribes. They fought over pasture and livestock, and even desecrated each other's burials. Using advanced tactics and efficient weaponry the nomads waged military campaigns against powerful states. Most warriors were archers on horseback, but some fought on foot using short swords and pointed battle-axes in close combat. Weapons were highly prized by their owners.

Image caption: Cranium of a man aged about 50 to 60 years with a Scythian arrowhead embedded in his eye-socket – evidence that tribes fought each other.

Photo: G.N. Toshchev

Image caption: Drawing of rock art scene at Sagyr, eastern Kazakhstan, showing two men wearing Scythian bow cases and attacking each other with pointed battle-axes.

Illustration: after Z.S. Samashev, 1992

Image caption: Gold decorated bow case as found in situ in the main burial chamber at Arzhan-2 in the Tuva region.

Photo: K.V. Chuganov

Showcase on right:

Gold clothing-plaque

This plaque shows two Scythian archers, each raising a composite or 'Scythian bow' in combat. Despite the miniature scale, we can see details including how their hair was tied back into a bun. Originally this was one of a large set of identical plaques, stitched onto clothing through the tiny holes around the edge.

4th century BC

Kul Oba burial mound, northern Black Sea region

Gold

British Museum

Image caption: Detail of the plaque showing the upper portion and 'Scythian bow' of the right archer.

© Trustees of the British Museum

Image caption: Detail of the plaque showing the trousers and boots of the right archer.

© Trustees of the British Museum

Showcase on left:

Iron arrowhead with gold overlays

This arrowhead may have served a special ritual function. Each side is decorated with gold showing a bird of prey attacking an antelope, represented by its head. The same grave contained other iron weapons: a short sword, a dagger, knives, a pointed battle-axe and gold-decorated arrowheads. When excavated, these items had turned into shapeless lumps. The State Hermitage Museum carefully cleaned the gold and reattached it to its now mineralized base.

7th century BC

Arzhan-2, Tuva region, southern Siberia

Iron, gold

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg



World of the Scythians

Arrowheads

Scythian arrowheads had two or three blades, and occasionally also a hooked spike at the base. They were attached to wooden arrowshafts with sinew thread. When this entered the body the sinew would stretch and make the arrowhead very difficult to extract. The intelligent design and aerodynamic body meant an experienced archer could shoot arrows over several hundred paces. These arrowheads were particularly effective against unarmoured individuals or animals and were commonly used after about 700 BC.

Cast arrowheads: bronze

7th century BC

Burial mounds 24, 29, Kelermes, Kuban region,
north-west Caucasus

Arrowheads with fragmentary shafts: bronze, wood, horn

7th century BC

Arzhan-2, Tuva region, southern Siberia

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Family label:

Amazing archers

These are arrowheads. The Scythians added spikes to their arrows which made them harder to remove and even more deadly. They were fierce warriors and invented a new type of powerful bow that their enemies copied.

Imagine what it would be like to face a Scythian warrior.

Painted arrow shafts

Painted arrow shafts are found in both elite and ordinary Scythian burials. Paint may have been used not just for decoration, but also for practical purposes to brand the arrow. In Scythian times arrows were stored with their heads pointing downwards within the quiver, where the painted part would have been visible.

3rd century BC

Burial mound 3, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains,
southern Siberia

Wood

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Image caption: Pine forest in winter, Siberia

© Pavel Filatov / Alamy Stock Photo

Showcase on left:

Part of a bow case and gold plaques

The elite burial at Arzhan-2 contained this bow case and quiver made of leather, decorated with gold plaques in the shape of a boar. The leather has long since disintegrated, but archaeologists were able to reconstruct the shape from the gold plaques, which were lying undisturbed and were meticulously recorded by the excavators. The quiver is decorated on both sides, so although case and quiver were combined, they were probably detachable.

7th century BC

Arzhan-2, Tuva region, southern Siberia

Wood; gold

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Image caption: Reconstruction of a Scythian bow case and quiver, based on the excavated finds from Arzhan-2.

Drawing: K.V. Chugunov

1-4 Gold sword-belt holders

Openwork belt holders (1) were found in the elite Scythian burial at Arzhan-2. Worn on the end of a warrior's belt, it is possible that the quantity of belt holders indicated the status of the person who owned them.

The belt straps worn by the couple buried at Arzhan-2 were decorated with gold fittings. These included a reclining wild goat (2) on the woman's dagger strap. Ornaments depicting a predator attacking an antelope (3) and a feline predator (4) were found beside the man's sword.

7th century BC

Arzhan-2, Tuva region, southern Siberia

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

World of the Scythians

Deer-shaped plaque

This plaque probably decorated a bow case. It is made of a thick piece of sheet gold, embossed and chased, with gold loops soldered to the back. The ear and eye were probably once filled with coloured glass. The workmanship indicates a highly skilled craftsman. The animal's reclining position, the ornamental treatment of its antlers and the division of the body into sections follow the principles of Scythian animal-style art.

650–600 BC

Burial mound 1, Kostromskaya, Kuban region,
north-west Caucasus

Embossed and chased gold

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Quote on wall:

**A people ... living, as the Scythians do ...
accustomed, one and all, to fight on horseback
with bows and arrows ... how can such a
people fail to defeat the attempt of an invader?**

Herodotus (about 484–425 BC), Greek historian

1-5 Bronze weapons with animal imagery

Knives and daggers from across the vast Scythian homeland vary considerably. Many of these have animal-shaped pommels. This complex weapon design demanded extremely precise moulding. It is only known among the Scythian nomads of the Minusinsk valley who had a highly developed bronze casting industry. One of these pommels (4) has a separate pin inserted into the top, which slides into a pair of slots inside the hilt.

- 1 Knife with pommel in the form of two goats
7th – 6th century BC
Chance find, Potroshiova village, southern Siberia
- 2 Knife with pommel in the form of a boar with fish on the hilt
7th – 6th century BC
Chance find, Korjakovo village, southern Siberia
- 3 Dagger with pommel representing wolves
8th – 7th century BC
Chance find, Kamskaya village, southern Siberia
- 4 Dagger and awl with boar-shaped pommel
9th – 8th century BC
Chance find, southern Siberia
- 5 Dagger with decorated wild ass pommel
9th – 8th century BC
Chance find, southern Siberia
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg



6 Iron dagger

This is a splendid example of a full-size Scythian battle dagger. Where discovered in excavations, they have only been found with male burials.

Along with bows and quivers, they form the core of the Pazyryk warrior's equipment. They were worn on the right thigh and the chape (a hard tip at the base of the scabbard) was tied to the leg with a cord to stop it flapping about.

4th–3rd century BC

Chance find, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia

Iron

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

7 Sword with decorated scabbard

Owing to iron corrosion, only fragments of this short sword's iron blade have survived within the gold scabbard. The rounded hilt with a butterfly-shaped guard is covered with gold leaf. The decoration is a mixture of ancient Near Eastern and Scythian motifs. Winged genies flanking a sacred tree are depicted on the guard and the scabbard's neck. Further down are winged bulls and lions.

The part by which the scabbard was attached to the belt shows a recumbent deer and birds' heads.

7th century BC

Burial mound 1, Kelermes, Kuban region,
north-west Caucasus

Cast and forged iron; chased gold

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

8 Iron sword

Weapons like this were used in close combat by both infantry and mounted soldiers. The oldest examples date to the 7th century BC and they became common between about 550 and 400 BC. Their wide use was probably related to the spread of metal armour. Evidence of blade trauma caused by a sword has been found on Scythian skeletons, indicating that not everyone wore armour.

5th century BC

Burial mound near the village of Brovarka, Dnieper region,
northern Black Sea

Forged iron

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

9 Iron dagger with gold decoration

The dagger belonged to a wealthy person who has become known as 'the golden man' because of the sheer quantity of gold ornaments originally sewn to his clothing. The pommel is in the form of a pair of griffins' heads facing each other, with gold wire wound around the grip and an ornamental plate running down the centre of the blade. The gold overlay is like that found on the pointed axe-head (right) from the 7th-century tomb at Arzhan-2, showing that this technique was practised over several centuries.

5th to 3rd century BC

Burial mound, Issyk, south-east Kazakhstan

Iron, gold

National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Astana

10 Pointed battle-axe

This type of battle-axe was frequently used by Scythians in hand-to-hand combat. Injuries caused by these weapons are found on skulls in cemeteries extending from southern Siberia to Ukraine. Each of the horses buried at Pazyryk was killed by a single axe blow to the forehead. This example is unusually well preserved. Both the axe part and the bottom of the handle are ornamented with gilded spirals. The handle is made of honeysuckle wood.

7th century BC

Grave 5, Arzhan-2, Tuva region, southern Siberia

Iron, gold, wood

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

11 Axes and mould

Battle-axes were widely used and are represented on some pre-Scythian and Scythian stone statues. The long wooden handles acted like levers to produce a mighty blow.

Tools like the socketed axe were used for chopping and working wood. The loops are in the shape of eagle's heads. They were made by casting in two-part moulds – one half of such a mould is shown here.

Forged iron battle-axe: 650–600 BC

Grave 29, Kelermes, Kuban region, north-west Caucasus

Bronze socketed-axe and mould: 7th–4th century BC

Kardosany village (chance find), Krasnoyarsk region, southern Siberia

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Family label:

Everyday essentials

Scythians carried their essential items with them, including a dagger and axe on their belt, and their prized bow and arrows. This meant they were always prepared in case they ran into trouble.

What essentials do you always have with you?

Helmet and body armour

Such helmets are typical of early Scythians but were later replaced by examples in Greek style. This helmet has holes where cheekpieces and a back-flap were attached. It represents the so-called Kuban type as large numbers have been found there, but it probably originated in northern China under the early Western Zhou dynasty (about 1046–771 BC).

Scale armour was designed to protect warriors from arrow-wounds and sword-blows. It was made by sewing overlapping metal scales onto a tanned leather vest. Only the upper edges were stitched so as not to restrict movement. The scales were made of bronze, iron or horn. Armour was commonly worn, judging by finds in several hundred Scythian tombs, but was not a guarantee of invulnerability.

Helmet: Cast bronze

650–600 BC

Burial mound 2, Kelermes, Kuban region, north-west
Caucasus

Body armour: Forged iron

5th century BC

Burial mound 401, near the village of Zhurovka
by the Dnieper River, northern Black Sea

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Wooden shields

These shields were mainly used by horsemen and had to be light and reasonably small. When found in burials, they are usually strapped to horse's saddles. Their light construction allowed them to be easily held and experiments show how well they would have stopped arrows. Both of these examples are made of wooden rods threaded through leather. Others were lacquered in Chinese style as this helped make the shield more resilient. The large example is the biggest Scythian shield to survive.

Late 4th – early 3rd century BC

Burial mound 1, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains, southern Siberia

Wood, leather, painted with cinnabar

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

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3rd century BC

Burial mound 3, Pazyryk, Altai Mountains, Siberia

Wood, leather

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Please do not remove from the exhibition

